You Can't Be What You Can't See

As the 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art celebrates a 25-year milestone, its CEO **Amrit Gill** talks about what's ahead.

WORDS | **SOPHIA CAI**
PHOTOGRAPHY | **NICK DE LORENZO**

Since its inception in 1996, Sydney's 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art has occupied a unique position in the Australian arts landscape as a premier organisation dedicated to contemporary Asian and Asian-Australian art and artists. From its grassroots artist-led origin to its present-day role as a leader and advocate in the industry, 4A has remained a steadfast space and home for generations of Asian-Australian artists, arts workers and curators, including its most recently appointed artistic director and chief executive officer **Amrit Gill**.

When I meet to speak with Gill, she has just landed that morning in Melbourne to attend the Melbourne Art Fair. We quickly bond over our shared experiences navigating the arts industry as Asian women, and Gill speaks with excitement about 4A coming out of a period of forced pause without an accessible gallery space due to not only disruptions from the pandemic, but also overdue council works on the heritage gallery building located in Sydney's Chinatown. The 2022 and 2023 program, which features primarily women identifying and non-binary artists, share common themes including spirituality and identity, and also includes its first early-career group show in eight years.

This is not Gill's first time working at 4A, and her story is one that might be familiar to other aspiring young Asian-Australian artists and arts workers entering the industry. Gill first volunteered at 4A while studying Art Theory at the University of New South Wales and recalls how she felt "disconnected from audience and community" at her university. "It was largely in the postcolonial arts subjects I took instead that I started learning about South Asia and Empire," Gill says. It is a strange phenomenon to learn about the history of your ancestors in a classroom context, but this experience has shaped Gill and the kind of work that she wants to do through arts programming. "You can't be what you can't see," she shares, quoting the words of activist **Marian Wright Edelman**.

We spend the rest of our time together pondering whether in 2022, the arts in Australia is progressing to a place where audiences are more Asia-literate, or whether audiences are expecting to see the diversity of Australia's population reflected in art galleries and museums. "There is more diversity in the workforce, however, it's not at senior levels," Gill shares, "so while you might have greater diversity among artists and somewhat among curators and administrators, it hits the ceiling at a certain point." She refers to recent research by Diversity Arts in 2019 titled *Shifting the Balance* that recorded the representation of culturally and linguistically diverse people in leadership roles in Australian arts organisations. The goal for Gill is to create programming at 4A that doesn't replicate the position of a "gatekeeper or gateway. To take a leadership position without owning that space." This is also in acknowledgement that not all Asian communities are given equal opportunities and space, and working equitably naturally involves "creating deeper connections with each show with whatever representation we are trying to achieve."

Turning to the future, it is clear that Gill takes her role at 4A as advocate and custodian seriously. She speaks of 4A's "long held aspiration to inhabit the whole building to transform it into a destination centre for contemporary Asian art, including a library, research spaces, artist studios, a dedicated shop front, and more exhibition spaces." Gill admits this is a long-term plan, one that might not eventuate until five to ten years down the track, but that the history and location of the present site holds much significance to 4A. "Longevity in this space is very important", Gill says, as it "affirms that Asian-Australian culture exists in the centre. This is where our roots are."

4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art CEO Amrit Gill.